

THE ITEM

YOUR WEEKLY NEIGHBORHOOD NEWSPAPER

\$2.24M needed for firehouse

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(Original publication: March 12, 2004)

The firehouse on Locust Avenue in Rye needs to be renovated because it is in violation of federal safety codes, firefighter John McDwyer said.



The 95-year-old firehouse needs to be renovated to meet standards set by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Americans with Disabilities Act, according to Rye Mayor Steve Otis. To fund the renovations, which include making hallways and entrances more accessible, as well as reconfiguring restrooms for disabled people, the City Council last month unanimously voted to present a \$2.24 million bond referendum to the public April 27.

Council debated whether to present the approved bond, which is called "Option B," or another \$3.6 million bond that would fund other infrastructural repairs needed at the house, called "Option A."

McDwyer, a 13-year veteran who also is on the city's Building Committee, said he wanted the larger bond to be presented for several reasons. First, deferring the repairs means that they will only go up in price in the future, he said. That means the City Council will have to raise taxes, he said. Plus, with annual interest rates for bonds around 4 to 5 percent, bonding now makes financial sense, McDwyer said. "Spending \$1.4 million now will probably save the taxpayers \$3 to 4 million years from now," he said.

Second, McDwyer said, the building is dilapidated from nearly a century of weathering. The plumbing and heating systems need major work, he said. Option A would have provided for the needs of the next 40 years, he said. "We were concerned we wouldn't make it through this last winter," he said. "This building is in serious jeopardy of being closed."

Otis said he would also like to have seen the more expensive bond proposed. But, he said, it wasn't the best financial decision the council could have made. "It's a difficult thing to weigh," Otis said. "While ideally Option A would have you do it (needed work) all at once, it's too expensive for the community."

City Comptroller Michael Genito said the bond would likely be for 20 years with an annual interest rate of 4.5 percent, depending on the stock market. The average tax increase for each homeowner would be \$57 annually. "It's almost shocking to hear how inexpensive it is," Genito said.

The firehouse is 12,268 square feet. The larger bond, if approved, would have funded an additional 692 square feet of office space. McDwyer said renovating the firehouse to meet the federal standards will cut into the existing space firefighters use.

In 1997, the city funded a study of its emergency services which found the firehouse needed infrastructural work and did not meet current safety codes. City Engineer George Mottarella said the violations were mostly ADA related. The city spent \$2 million in 1999 to keep the firehouse functioning. Over the last 30 years, an office addition was made and an air conditioning unit was installed.

While McDwyer said he believes many residents would have supported the larger bond, the firefighters and residents have a mutual understanding that the firehouse needs work.

"People might ask, 'how could you spend all this money?' But many of these things are out of our control. The most prudent thing is to jump on it now."